DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 912 CS 205 998

AUTHOR Wolcott, Willa
TITLE The Use of Structured Modules in Writing Center Classes: A Helpful Strategy for Teaching Writing Skills.
PUB DATE Oct 80
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Florida State Reading Council (18th, St. Petersburg, FL, October 16-18, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education: *Learning Modules: Program Descriptions: *Remedial Instruction: *Teaching Methods: Writing (Composition): *Writing Instruction: Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Laboratories

ABSTRACT

At the University of Florida, writing laboratory classes follow a structured, independent curriculum designed to help students write effective paragraphs and edit their own writing. The four periods in the biweekly block of instruction are devoted to instruction in writing techniques and sentence skills, revision, mastery tests, and individual writing conferences discussing independent work on sentence skills. Besides work on common sentence errors, usage, dialect problems, punctuation, and spelling, students work with instructors on a series of structured modules that isolate skills such as writing controlling ideas, using transitions, and providing concrete support. Each module emphasizes the following seven prewriting and revision skills: (1) locating the information, (2) writing strong controlling ideas, (3) supporting ideas with specifics, (4) organizing the information, (5) writing a first draft, (6) revising for content and organization, and (7) revising for sentence correctness and clarity. A comparison of the pre- and posttest grammar exercises and writing samples of 78 students has indicated the benefits of this teaching strategy in improving students' basic writing skills. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED194912

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE USE OF STRUCTURED MODULES IN WRITING CENTER CLASSES: A HELPFUL STRATEGY FOR TEACHING WRITING SKILLS

by

Willa Wolcott
Writing Center Coordinator
University of Florida

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Willa Wolcott

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS205998

Talk given at the Annual Meeting of the Florida State Reading Council, October 17, 1980

A key problem confronting many students in basic writing programs is learning how to balance all the writing skills necessary for an acceptable paper. While students may be successful at completing isolated workbook exercises on grammar or on topic sentences and paragraph development, many have difficulty transferring these skills to their own writing or combining these elements into a workable composition. The use of highly structured modules in writing laboratory classes at the University of Florida has helped students deal with this problem.

Format and Curriculum of the Laboratory Classes

The laboratory classes, offered by the writing component of the Reading and Writing Center, consist of small groups of students who meet twice weekly with graduate assistants as their instructors. Open to all University students seeking to improve their writing skills, the classes are, however, required of all Special Admission freshmen who take the laboratory course as a supplement to their regular composition classes. They are given one credit for the course and are graded on a satisfactory-unsatisfactory basis.

The laboratory classes follow a structured, independent curriculum of their own. The two main objectives are for students to write effective paragraphs and to edit their own writing; to meet these goals, students pursue a bi-weekly study of writing and sentence skills. One of the four periods in the bi-weekly block is devoted to instruction in writing techniques,

one to instruction in sentence skills, one to individual writing conferences in conjunction with independent work on sentence skills, and one to class revision of student sentences, along with mastery tests on sentence skills.

For the sentence skills portion of the curriculum, students work--both independently and as a group--on areas which typically cause them difficulty in their writing. Such areas include common sentence errors, usage, dialect problems, punctuation, and spelling.

Structured Writing Modules

For the writing portion of the curriculum, students work with their laboratory instructors through a series of structured modules designed to help students learn how to balance the necessary writing skills for an acceptable paper. Each module guides the students through a series of pre-writing steps which culminate in a composition assignment of paragraph length. The paragraph unit was chosen as the appropriate focus for several reasons: First, it gives the students a chance to work on many writing skills common in longer papers. Second, it enables the students to concentrate on the individual skills of the pre-writing process. Finally, because the resulting compositions are fairly short, it allows the laboratory instructors to confer individually with students about each assignment.

In each module the following seven step sequence is used to emphasize pre-writing and revision skills:

1) Locating the information
2) Writing a strong controlling idea
3) Supporting the idea with specifics
4) Organizing the information
5) Writing a first draft
6) Revising for content and organization
7) Revising for sentence correctness and clarity

While these steps are not new, the repetition of this strategy in the Writing Center classes does provide students with a systematic approach for tackling many writing assignments.

Within the larger context of these seven steps, each module isolates a single skill for particular emphasis. For example, one module might deal with controlling ideas, another with transitions, and a third with ways to provide concrete support. The isolated skill is first discussed and then followed with a series of exercises which require the students to practice the skill; sample paragraphs illustrating the effective use of the skill are included for analysis as well.

Sample Module

An example taken from the module emphasizing transitions illustrates this approach. The module contains a short discussion of the purpose of transitions and of the various types of linking devices, such as the use of transitional words, the deliberate repetition of a key word, or the deliberate repetition of a specific sentence pattern. Also included in this discussion is a review of ways in which to punctuate transitions.

The explanation is followed by a series of exercises similar to the following sample in which students must practice applying the skill:

EXERCISE: *Read the following sentences and insert in each blank an appropriate transitional word. Use different transitions, and watch your punctuation.*

1. The President's energy proposal contains several steps. _____ he has suggested that an escalating tax be placed on gas to limit its consumption.
2. _____ he wants to restrict the purchase of large, gas-guzzling cars.
3. He has _____ stressed the importance of insulating homes and buildings.
4. _____ as the last step of his plan, he would seek the development of more oil and coal reserves.
5. Congress agrees that our lack of energy is a serious problem; _____ they do not agree completely with the President's program.
6. _____ it is still unclear what the government will do about the energy problem.

Finally, students are asked to examine a series of model paragraphs, such as the following excerpt which exemplifies the use of transitional words and the repetition of a key term.

Going off to college amounts to a declaration of independence for most college freshmen. To be certain, students have experienced various degrees of independence prior to their arrival on a college campus. Rarely, however, has the independence assumed as many forms or made as many demands on them as it does their freshman year. Not only must students choose their own courses, for example, but they must also assume responsibility for managing their money and for making independent decisions about their own lifestyle. Within certain guidelines prescribed by the university, they are free to set their own hours for socializing or study, to follow their own eating habits, to choose their own friends, to pursue their own patterns of thought. Admittedly, such freedom of choice allows for much error; however, through acting independently and assuming responsibility for these acts, students grow and gain maturity. Thus coping with independence must be a major learning experience for most college freshmen.

Once the students have completed the initial work on the isolated skill, they then move through the seven-step strategy as a whole.

STEP 1: *Locating the Information*

For the first step, locating the information, students are given an assigned topic--often one which is provided in the module itself in the form of political cartoons, charts, short readings, or magazine advertisements. Sometimes other topics require students to draw upon their own experience. Having such directed assignments requires the students to be more involved with the actual process of pre-writing and writing than with the process of trying to find a suitable topic.

STEP 2: *Writing a Strong, Controlling Idea*

For the second step, students must formulate the controlling idea for their paper. The objective of this step is to help students learn how to phrase precisely generalizations that will provide a tight focus for their papers. Hence, all the assignments are posed as questions, so that students' answers to the questions can result in direct assertions about their topics.

STEP 3: *Supporting the Idea With Specifics*

For the third step, supporting with specifics, the students must answer a series of questions designed to elicit details about each topic; some assignments even require the students to complete charts with this information. The students are then shown how to use these details as supporting evidence for their controlling ideas. Through these means they are

constantly made aware of the necessity for supporting their generalizations with evidence.

STEP 4: *Organizing the Information*

The importance given to the fourth step, organizing material, varies with the module. In those modules developed primarily by example or reason, the students are instructed to examine possible relationships between their ideas and to weigh the order of their importance. In other modules, such as process or comparison, the primary pattern of organization is, in fact, the skill emphasized, although factors of audience or point of view are considered as well.

STEP 5: *Writing a First Draft*

Once these four pre-writing steps are completed in class under the supervision of the laboratory instructor, students undertake the fifth step, writing the first draft, outside class. At this stage they are urged to focus primarily upon committing their ideas to paper in an organized manner.

STEP 6: *Revising for Content and Organization*

However, as soon as their drafts are done, students are directed to revise their papers at least twice, since revision, along with pre-writing, is an essential component of the seven-step strategy. As part of Step 6, for example, students are given a checklist to aid them in examining their compositions for whatever aspects of content and organization they have just studied in the module. The sample questions which follow serve as a guide:

___ 1. Do you have a strong controlling idea which provides a limited focus for your paragraph?

___ 2. Have you developed your paragraph with specific examples? Do the examples include only relevant details?

___ 3. Have you used transitions which accurately express the relationship among your ideas?

STEP 7: *Revising for Sentence Correctness and Clarity*

Similarly, for Step 7, students are required to examine their papers a second time for the specific grammatical and mechanical errors they have studied concurrently with the writing module. If, for instance, they have just studied sentence fragments or faulty parallelism, then the checklist focuses upon those areas. However, as the following sample indicates, the checklists for both revision steps are cumulative in that each revision guideline directs the students to consider any other aspects studied previously. Various methods, such as reading each sentence aloud or working backward from the last sentence, are suggested to improve the student's concentration on proofreading.

___ 1. Have you avoided sentence fragments?
___ 2. Have you avoided run-on sentences?
___ 3. Are your sentences parallel?
___ 4. Are your verb forms in standard English?
___ 5. Do your subjects agree with your verbs?

Conferences and Group Revision Work

Once the papers are done, the students confer individually with the laboratory instructor about their work. The conferences focus both on writing techniques and on sentence skills, particularly those which bother individual students or which were reviewed in class. Often students have to revise their papers once or twice before having them accepted by the instructor. Finally, sentences are taken from a number of student papers and are used in class for group revision work. The sentences selected frequently emphasize the areas of sentence skills which students have just studied and on which they have been given a mastery test. By attempting to identify errors in their own writing, students thereby apply what they have learned in their workbook exercises.

Evaluation of the Approach

The effectiveness of this approach in helping students improve their basic writing skills has been suggested in a recent evaluation of the writing program. The evaluation was based on a comparison of the pre- and post-grammar test results of 78 students and on a holistic scoring of their pre- and post-writing samples. Both types of tests were administered to Special Admission students in June of 1979 and again in December, 1979, after they had completed two quarters of work.

For the writing sample, students were asked to respond to a general question about three related cartoons. This choice of topic, while requiring students to make a generalization and support it with specifics, allowed students to concentrate

more on the writing process itself than on the generation of content. Because pre- and post-writing topics could be interchanged with a second set of cartoons, the use of this format provided a controlled framework in which to evaluate whether or not improvement had occurred in students' writing. The objective grammar test was developed by the Center both to differentiate among the skills of the Special Admission students and to include typical dialect problems. Approximating college expository essays, both the pre- and post-exams tested for those areas of sentence skills covered in the laboratory classes. Each sentence of the essays, while sequential, formed a separate, self-contained testing unit. Students were required to identify the error in the item and then locate the one option which corrected the error and was free of all other errors. Through this procedure students were following the same editing procedure on the objective tests that they were urged to use in their own writing.

On the post-grammar test, the mean score increased by 24 percentage points, and the median score increased by 26 percentage points. Improvement was also shown on the papers. A team of six graduate assistants holistically scored the anonymous pre- and post-writing samples, which were randomly assigned to different sets of readers and which were interchanged as to topic, so that the readers did not know whether they were reading an early or a final paper. Results of the scoring indicated that 60 percent of the students improved by one, two, or three levels; 10 percent declined by one level, and the remaining 30 percent showed no change.

Significance of the Evaluation

Because similar findings have occurred in other years, the evaluations suggest that the overall structured writing program has been beneficial to many Special Admission students. First, the format of the laboratory program appears to work well; that is, the group instruction which students receive in problematic areas of writing and grammar is balanced with the individual attention they receive during the conferences on their papers. Second, the writing modules themselves provide the students with a structured approach to the kinds of writing they are required to do in college. To be certain, these modules have limitations: they neither allow for much creativity on the part of the students nor do they deal with students' frequent difficulty in finding something to say on a loosely-defined topic. However, the systematic strategy set forth in the modules does give students a framework through which they can learn to organize and develop their ideas with coherence. Moreover, the use of the modules in the laboratory classes forces students to practice their writing skills and to apply their grammar knowledge; this emphasis on application is further reinforced in the group revision of student sentences at the culmination of each module assignment. Thus, students begin to learn how to integrate and balance the various skills of the writing process, and in so doing, learn how to exert some control over what they write.